

Yakovlev Meets With Lithuanians

Soviet Legislature Approves Law Setting Rules for Secession

By David Remnick
Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW, April 3—A delegation of Lithuanian legislators met with Politburo member Alexander Yakovlev today in the first high-level talks since the war of nerves between the Kremlin and Vilnius began last month.

Egidijus Bickauskas, a member of the Lithuanian parliament, said the meeting with Yakovlev did not amount to formal negotiations on Lithuanian independence, calling it preliminary "consultations and

talks." Still, the Lithuanians, led by Deputy Prime Minister Romualdas Ozolas, were pleased with the breakthrough 90-minute meeting even though there were no promises of official negotiations.

Yakovlev is Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's closest ally both in the Communist Party leadership and in the new presidential cabinet. One source said the atmosphere of the meeting was "informal and friendly" and both sides presented their positions "completely calmly." The Lithuanians expect to meet Wednesday with

Interior Minister Vadim Bakatin and said they would continue to seek a session with Gorbachev.

Today's meeting came as both chambers of the Supreme Soviet passed a tough new law on secession, though representatives from the three Baltic states said they would ignore the measure. Until now, the Soviet constitution had allowed secession in principle, but there were no mechanisms for a republic to leave the union.

The new law says that for a republic to secede, it must pass a popular referendum by a two-thirds vote and then undergo a five-year

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transition during which the political, military and economic terms of secession would be negotiated.

If fewer than two-thirds of the voters opt for secession, then the republic is not allowed to try another such vote for 10 years. And if after the transition period one-tenth of the voters demand the right to reconsider, there must be yet another referendum.

Lithuanian legislator Nikolai Medvedev said the new law, which must still be approved by the Congress of People's Deputies, "is not really a law on leaving the union, but on staying in." Without the Balts participating and only a few Georgians voting against it, the bill passed through both chambers overwhelmingly.

The measure will be especially hard on the independence movements in Estonia and Latvia. Unlike Lithuania, where the population is 80 percent Lithuanian and heavily in favor of secession, there are large Slavic populations in the two other republics that are apprehensive about independence.

The law would make it almost inconceivable, under present circumstances, for a Slavic republic such as the Ukraine to leave the union because of the heavily Russian population in the eastern part of the republic.

The Kremlin leadership is now preparing a series of radical economic reform measures, including price reform, that will undoubtedly be painful for the general public, and many legislators insist that Gorbachev cannot afford to have a secession crisis during that period.

Legislator Fyodor Burlatsky, who was recently made editor in chief of the influential weekly Literaturnaya Gazeta, said, "We're not afraid of Lithuania, we're afraid of a chain reaction. If one republic goes, then this could happen very easily We don't need a civil war."

The Baltic republics claim a special right to independence, maintaining that they were illegally annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940 as part of prewar pact with Nazi Germany. Gorbachev, for his part, insists that all 15 Soviet republics



REUTERS

Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis, left, confers with deputies during yesterday's session of Vilnius legislature.

will have the right to leave the union, but only on the basis of the new secession law—a measure that appears designed to buy as much time as possible.

Bickauskas said the Lithuanians went to Gorbachev's office today in an attempt to arrange a meeting, but had received no response from the Soviet leader's aides. A Kremlin spokesman said that Gorbachev would enter into formal talks with Lithuania only if the republic repealed its March 11 declaration of independence.

"The situation in Lithuania can be resolved only on the basis of the Soviet constitution in a peaceful process," said Gorbachev's new presidential spokesman, Arkady Maslennikov. "If the Lithuanian leaders decide to return to the fold and to the Soviet constitution, then everything can be discussed. Inde-

pendent states are not created overnight."

Maslennikov said that "discussions cannot be held on the basis of commands, ultimatums and unilateral rupture of relations that have been established over decades."

Politburo member Anatoly Lukyanov told Soviet journalists that the Kremlin's current stand toward Lithuania is "calm, clear and rather friendly."

Despite what the Soviet news agency Tass called "conciliatory noises" now being sounded between Vilnius and Moscow, the situation in Lithuania remains tense.

Moscow closed Lithuania's frontier with Poland between Lazdijai and the Polish town of Ogrodniki, about 180 miles northeast of Warsaw. Poland is the only foreign country that has a border with Lithuania.

Government and military officials in Vilnius told workers that a printing plant taken over by Soviet soldiers early Saturday was the property of the Soviet Communist Party and that the pro-independence newspapers Solglasiye, Respublica, Atgiminas and Gimtasis Krastas could no longer be printed on the premises. Two other newspapers, Eko Litvy and Tiesa, may also be banned. The plant will continue to print the official party newspaper Sovyetskaya Litva in Lithuanian, Russian and Polish.

Estonia's legislature issued a strong statement of support for the Lithuanians today, and voted down a counter-resolution by mainly Russian deputies condemning Vilnius. Edgar Savisaar, chairman of the Estonian Popular Front, was elected the republic's prime minister.